From Darkness, Light

Praise circumstances for the time of your birth, young one. For you will know the honor and responsibilities and delights of being among the first in five millennia to leave Kesh…to take your place in ruling a Sith galaxy.
-Sith Master Olaris Rhea of the Lost Tribe
DL-I-DL

Sith Saber Vestara Khai remained emotionless as she listened to the Circle of Lords from her seat on the perimeter of the Circle Chambers. Her victory almost two years earlier had brought her much accolades at first, but those accolades slowly turned her into the 'go-to' target for the lesser Lords and Ladies trying to get ahead on the council. Having only recently ascended to Saber, she had been ill-equipped for such political fencing. Needless to say, that despite Ship still remaining loyal to her, she had lost much more than she had gained. Her failings were something she was bitterly aware of, her father's lecture of '*If you were not ready to spar with Lords and Ladies, then perhaps you should have remembered that before accepting the Grand Lord's assignment. Hubris has been the end of many, and it looks like it will be your own downfall as well'* echoing loudly in her mind.

Despite the rousing success of her initial mission, subsequent campaigns for supplies, fuel, and technology had fallen to the very vultures she had fought so hard to best. Even her next mission had been conducted under the supervision of a Sith Master, no thanks to her father's political machinations within the Circle of Lords. Machinations she was fast learning to adapt to if she wanted to remain relevant in the decision making of the Tribe.

"Grand Lord," Lord Ysadria Kaladris, Grand Lord Darish Vol's most trusted advisor, stood to speak. "The time is nearly at hand to return the Tribe to the galaxy and once again establish the Sith Empire our forbearers dreamed of. The question the Lords and Ladies of this circle have time and time again fenced around is who will have the esteemed honor to lead our fleets into battle."

"You have a recommendation, Lord Kaladris?"

"Yes, Grand Lord." The dark-skinned human steepled his fingers as he inclined his head. "Both High Lord Taalon, and High Lady Sashal have repeatedly distinguished themselves above their peers. As the number of ships under our command is sizable indeed, I recommend we give each control of half the fleet. They will, of course, remain answerable to you, Grand Lord. When it comes to tactical decisions, you will have the final say."

Vestara reined in her emotions the best she could. It should have been her to command at least part of the fleet. She was the reason why the Tribe had any sort of fleet to begin with. From being responsible for finding parts to repair the *Omen*, to raiding fuel shipments to fuel the ships the Tribe had captured. All of it had been made possible because Ship had chosen *her*. Had advised the Tribe and was instrumental to their success. To deny her a place of honor…

Patience, Ship's voice echoed in the back of her mind. *Draw no attention to yourself. Your time will come*.
The dark-haired Kesh native slowly unclenched her chair's armrests, her blue eyes blazing with silent rage.

"Saber Khai, it looks as if you have something to say," Lord Yuvar Xal commented neutrally, green eyes slanting her way. Despite his relatively innocent statement, Vestara knew that he was one of the players working against her. As he had intended, the eyes of the Circle of Lords were once again on her. "Has Ship provided you with any insight on this matter?"

Vestara choked back her biting retort, unwilling to let the Sith Master know he was getting to her. She instead folded her hands in her lap and let a small smile tug on her lips. The scar she had obtained from her fight with the Jedi Skywalker gave her gesture a more menacing slant. "Lord Xal, I assure you. If Ship wished for any of her insight to be shared with you, you'd be the last to know."

"Could have just said 'no'," Yuvar shrugged uncaringly. "I merely thought that you'd want command of a part of the fleet yourself. After all, you were responsible for bringing us the first ships for our fleet."

Vestara's eyes narrowed. "My time will come, Lord Xal. I am sure that High Lord Taalon and High Lady Sashal are more than capable of

managing the fleet. Mastering several thousand years of space combat strategy through theory and simulators is not my idea of fun."

This caused several in the circle to chuckle.
The Grand Lord waved Yuvar off. "Leave the girl alone, Lord Xal. She has performed her service to the Tribe and knows her station."
Patience, Ship reminded her again. Vestara let out several short, calming breaths, through her forced smile, well aware that the Circle was still watching her. "You honor me, Grand Lord."

"You will of course inform this Circle should Ship have anything pertinent to say?" Darish Vol added.

"Of course. For the Tribe," Vestara bowed her head.
The meeting went on, assignments and sectors divvied up by the Circle. The more prestigious tasks—those engaging the Jedi directly, or leading a portion of the fleet to capture a specific objective, or even establishing Tribe colonies on other worlds—were given to those the Grand Lord favored most. Tasks like rear-guard action, supply-convoy duty, or even staying on Kesh to manage things while everyone else went off to fight, were given to those least favored.

Vestara purposefully kept her Force presence blank as her assignment was given to her. It was only due to the fact that she still held favor with her old master, Lady Orlaris Rhea, and High Lord Takaris Yur that she wasn't assigned to Kesh. Her own father had voted for her to remain behind, claiming that she was too young and ignorant of politicking and war to be involved.

Her childhood friend's remark about knowing who she'd choose as a sacrifice had they still practiced the old ways couldn't have rung louder at that moment.

"Lords, Ladies," High Lord Takaris Yur spoke. As he did, as was usual, the room went quiet. He had risen to his post not from personal ambition or treachery, but because he tended to back the right Tyros, Sabers, and Masters, and was rewarded well for his support. His words were dissected and analyzed several times over, because everyone knew that his support meant someone was destined to rise. Conversely, it also meant that the rise would come at someone's expense. "I believe we should grant Saber Khai the right to join her brothers and sisters in battle. We are but one planet and will need all

the able-bodied fighters in our retinue if we are to succeed. She has proven herself to the Tribe, has shed blood for it. Do any of you have a reason against her fighting for the Tribe?"

Worded as it was, no one challenged the High Lord's position.

"Very well, we will assign her a troop-transport," the Grand Lord said dismissively. "As one of the only one of us who has gone up against Jedi and survived, she will be of great use to us on the frontlines."
"And what of the Meditation Sphere?" Another voiced.

"It will travel along with us. Though its technology is old, its weaponry is still quite lethal," High Lord Taalon said aloud. "If we are to establish a new Sith Empire, it is only fitting vestige of the old bear witness to our return."

"Pardon me, High Lord Taalon," Lady Rhea spoke up. "But the Meditation Sphere only responds to my apprentice. You cannot relegate her to a troop transport and have the ship in battle at the same time."

"Then it will be in the cargo-hold of my flag," Grand Lord Vol said waspishly. "Either way, it will come with us. But your apprentice will *not* set foot on it in this campaign."
Vestara remained silent. On one hand she was relieved that she'd again be leaving Kesh. On the other, she knew that the Grand Lord and those against her were expecting her to be among the first to die for the Tribe. Not that she was adverse to the idea, she just didn't want to die because of the political machinations of the Circle.

As the meeting wound down, final details being ironed out and last-minute political battles fought, Vestara silently stood and left the room. She knew that nothing more would be accomplished, and that staying would only invite others to target her once more.

Inside she was seething. Again her fate had been decided not by her own strength, but because someone else had intervened on her behalf. She was nearly seventeen now, she was Sith, and if her passions were incapable of giving her the strength she needed to defeat her enemies…
She trailed off at the thought. If it wasn't enough, then what?

"Saber Khai."

"Saber Raas," Vestara smiled darkly as she turned to face her childhood sparring partner. Despite a few dates after the success of her first mission, she felt very little other than a faint friendship with the Keshiri she had grown up alongside with. Social status notwithstanding, as he was a lowly Keshiri and she a pure-human Sith, she had just never felt the same for him as he obviously did for her. Given the level of pride they both had, the breakup had not been amicable at all.

"Still have your head," the Keshiri Sith remarked. In past times, that might have been meant humorously, a statement said between friends in jest. But this time Ahri's almost bitter disappointment bled through his forced smile.
"Not for your master's lack of trying."

"I just heard from Master Xal," Ahri said with pride. "I am to serve on his flagship, the *Dark Blade*. The giant triangle vessel you captured."

"It is called a Star Destroyer, Saber Raas," Vestara remarked, sighing and wondering when Ahri would get to his point. "A *Victory*-class. We are about to invade the galaxy, the least you can do is learn the proper names for their war-machines."

"When they are ours, we can call them whatever we please," Ahri laughed dismissively.

"I assume someone of your fame managed to get an assignment on the *Omen* itself."

"Do you really expect the Grand Lord to welcome me on his flag?" Vestara remarked caustically.

"He likes to keep an eye on his enemies," Ahri shrugged.

"Apparently, I don't register as a threat," Vestara said bitterly. "I am to serve under Master Tola Annax in the ground forces. We are to be deployed from the frigate *Starstalker*."

"The honor of personally killing the enemy is a great one," Ahri's white eyebrows shot up.

"So is obliterating a whole unit of ground soldiers with a single turbolaser," Vestara remarked. "Dead is dead, doesn't matter how. Only, I am not afforded the protection of a Type-Seven Kuati-made shield generator and several meters of armored plating."

"If you're serving under Master Annax, you'll run into a few familiar faces," Ahri said, ignoring her comment. "Both Sabers Vran and Kaara were assigned to her as well."

"You are very well informed for someone who wasn't at the meeting."

"I am well loved by the Circle," Ahri replied lightly.

"Favor comes and goes, Ahri," Vestara answered back. "Trust me, I know. You weren't waiting for me outside the Circle Chambers just to boast, Ahri. What do you want?"

"You left before my master could ask. But do you plan to take the Jedi with you or put him down?"

Vestara arched a single eyebrow. "Yes."

"Yes? You'll kill him or take him with you?"

"Since when was Master Xal interested in my property?" Vestara parried. "What I do with my slave is of no concern to him. I captured the Jedi and by right he is mine. Keshiri and Circle Law agree on that point."

"Yes, but he is a Jedi," Ahri pressed. "We cannot take the chance that he'll escape and tell his people all he's learned from us."

"He's had many chances to escape, to kill me, he has not," Vestara answered. "I will not let fear and uncertainty rule my actions."

"Master Xal was right. The Jedi has poisoned your mind, made you weak."

"Then your master should have nothing to fear from me," Vestara sighed, waving him off and gaining several steps on him. "I grow tired of this Ahri. Are you done being your master's ack dog?"

"There's still time to reconsider my offer." This time the friendliness was gone from his voice. "We would be a great team, Vestara. I have but to tell my master that you've reconsidered our relationship and you will be with me on his flag for the coming war. All you have to do is agree to be my…"

"Saber Raas," Vestara said tersely, stopping in her tracks and controlling her breathing. "I will never be 'your' anything. I have made that clear several times over. I will serve the Tribe however it deems I should. Whether that is in Ship, on the ground, or in a cruiser of my own. But I will *never* stoop to your levels to get ahead."

Ahri's face became stony. "You are making a great mistake, Vestara. My master and myself are part of the fastest rising faction on Kesh. It would best for you to be on our good side and enjoy the luxuries that entails. If not…well, the scar that mars the beauty on your face will only be the beginning of your problems."

Vestara's eyes flashed yellow as she spun towards him. "The influence that you and your master hold is only good so long as you're alive. Do not test me, Saber Raas. You are Keshiri and will always be lower than the true members of the Tribe. When I rise and take my father's spot, you best remember what *I* will do for those who opposed *me*."
Not letting Ahri say another word, Vestara stalked off, her Force energies radiating 'danger' to anyone who dared approach her.
DL-II-DL
Her bad mood continued as she stormed through the front doors of her family's manor, her rage and frustrations hiding the hurt and fear. The household serving staff quickly hurried out of the way, none of them wanting to test an enraged Sith. Their cowardice only fueled her anger, her booted feet clicking loudly on the marble flooring, announcing her path.

He will learn his place. Ship relayed

Vestara mentally agreed, several painful scenarios for Ahri playing out in her mind. In their youth they had always been play-rivals at best, both working to strengthen the other. Ahri had the disadvantage of being Keshiri, seen as a lesser race on the human-minority dominated world. Regardless of his Force abilities and martial prowess, the very biological fact that he was Keshiri meant that he was lower than her in

Kesh society. Furthermore, due to the fact that her family could trace its lineage all the way back to one of the ranking Sith during the crash five thousand years ago, she was several tiers higher than most humans on the planet. When she had first met Ahri, her own family hadn't been as favored due to them being at odds with the Grand Lord, and she and Ahri had teamed up to make the Tribe acknowledge their worth.

But times changed. Vestara's own father used her successful campaigns for his own gain, advancing into the Circle and gaining favor from the Grand Lord. Ahri's strength and ambitions had been noted by Yuvar Xal, a member of a powerful faction in the Circle, and he had promptly taken to his new role and position in Kesh society. Where her fame and fortunes diminished as multiple factions and actors within the Circle worked to limit her influence, Ahri's stock rose.

She burst into her home's library through one last set of doors, the wooden panels rocking back in their frames. The one person on the planet who wasn't cowed by her, wasn't planning some ulterior plot to advance himself, wasn't looking to stab her in the back at first opportunity, looked up mildly from the book he was reading.

"Told you so," the Jedi Master she had 'captured' on her first mission said in greeting. During his 'stay' at her place, he had quickly caught on to Keshiri Basic, the language that had developed over the five millennia since the *Omen* had been marooned on the planet. In turn, she had also learned and refined her 'modern' Basic with him and was almost just as fluent.

"Don't!" Vestara snarled in Keshiri Basic, the word sounding more like '*din'* to a modern Basic speaker. She held up the pain-device for the shock-collar he wore. "I'm not in the mood, slave!" '*Em na enzi felit, sla'e!'*

"This makes it, what? The fifth time I've predicted what would happen in the meeting? Or was it the seventh? I've lost track."

Vestara snarled and depressed the button, dropping the Jedi Master from the chair in a spasming wreck. She switched to modern Basic. "I said I wasn't in the mood. Damn it! Why do you make me do this!?"

Once she released the button, the Jedi Master calmly climbed back into the chair, feeling no fear or even anger towards her. "Got it out of your system?"

The feeling of pity, of sympathy, it made her sick. She threw the remote aside and stormed up to him, grabbing the collar of his rough-hewn tunic. Despite the fact that he had at least fifty kilograms and nearly sixty centimeters on her, the Force assisted her as she hauled him out of the chair. "*Hawe*!? How could you predict the outcome so many times! How could you know my people better than myself?"
Do not concern yourself with the Jedi, he is...

"Oh shut up," the Jedi sighed, a Force pulse coursing through the room. "Kriff, how can you stand to have that thing connected to you?"

Vestara jerked as Ship's words died mid-sentence. Aside from the fact that his collar was also supposed to suppress his Force-usage, this was the first time her link to the sentient vessel had even been dampened. "What... What did you do?"

"Took a while to work it out," Doran Sarkin-Tainer, shrugged. He picked up the book he had been reading off the floor and set it on the nearby table. "Helps your dad built this giant library celebrating the power of the Sith."

"How can you even use the Force?" Vestara stammered, pressing her hand into his chest.

"Neural disruptor tech has advanced quite a bit," Doran tapped on the collar. "The model your people mass-reproduce has a slight flaw. Though it will initially dampen the ability to use the Force, if one adapts to the energy output and knows alternative methods of Force-using, then the collar becomes a heavy piece of jewelry. And to answer your next question, I've been able to use the Force after my fifth month here."

Vestara's jaw dropped and she released his shirt, backing up several steps. "Fifth month...You've been here for over a year and a half! How come you've stayed? I know you are a powerful Jedi, and clever too."

"Thank you," Doran smiled warmly. "I've stayed because I wanted to. I find this planet and your people...interesting. In my youth I zoomed

around the galaxy finding ancient holocrons and talking to Force-users from eras long past. Finding an entire civilization built upon the precepts of the Sith Empire at its heyday is an opportunity I couldn't pass up."

"Again for knowledge," Vestara accepted.

"That, and it looked like you could use a friend."

Vestara regard him warily. "'Friend?'"

"Yup," Doran replied cheerfully. "Tell me the talks we've had since my coming here haven't been fun?"

"I practically shocked you in every conversation," Vestara said in disbelief, pointing to the discarded remote.

"The truth hurts. When pain and deception are the only things you are familiar with, facing something new can be scary."

"I am *not* afraid."

"Not anymore. But when we first started talking you believed that every word out of my mouth was a lie. That the galaxy couldn't possibly be flourishing under the Jedi, or that the Jedi way had any merits. You saw me as a foolish idealist who was ignorant of the dark side and lacking any ambition."

"I got most of that right," Vestara countered. "You still lack ambition and you definitely are a foolish idealist."

"But I have never once lied, omitted, or hid the truth from you regardless of whether the truth would make you zap me," Doran pointed out.

Vestara looked away, feeling the tears she had been trying to keep at bay slowly escape her tight control. "The Grand Lord and others are blinded by their greed. I am the *only* person with modern-day combat experience, who's actually been in ship-to-ship battles! They're giving command of the fleet *I* acquired to two members of the Circle who've spent most of their time on Kesh overseeing the military and police

units. Their pride and ambition are going to doom the Tribe, and there's *nothing* I can do about it."

"Staying alive would be a good start," Doran pointed out patiently, walking to the window to give Vestara some semblance of privacy. "Let me guess…frontline soldier or fighter pilot?"

"Frontline," Vestara emitted a sobbing laugh, shaking her head. "Again, how'd you even know?"

"Student of history," Doran offered her a kind smile. "Success that comes to those who do not truly earn it breeds envy and contempt. You never earned Ship, it chose you. That made you special in the eyes of others, made you a threat. What if the people rallied around you and Ship? What if, you gained enough support to make the Circle moot? The thousands of years of tradition and order would have been thrown out the window for what? A neophyte Saber? Some might empathize with you, see you as the opportunity the Tribe needs to be great once more. That will only harden the ill-will, only prove their suspicions right. You might believe in a Sith Empire with the Tribe at the top. A great goal, really. The guys like the Grand Lord, however, can only see a Sith Empire with *them* at the top."

"There's a difference?" Vestara sniffled, wiping at her eyes.

"You know there is. You have a saying, 'For the Tribe'. The guys and gals with big egos who decide everything, hear 'for you, my lord' every single time."

"What do I do now?" Vestara whispered softly, unwilling to look in the Jedi's direction. Bereft of allies, of anyone who she could truly trust, she couldn't believe she had voiced the question to her slave.

"Look at it from another point of view. The guys that assigned themselves the cushy ships, whoever's taken over that Star Destroyer, have made themselves fantastic targets. You only have five cruisers, a dreadnaught, and more frigates than I was able to count," Doran answered.

"Two-hundred and eighteen," Vestara supplied.

"Two-hundred and eighteen frigates. Your cruisers and dreadnaught are the backbone of your navy, and any competent military force will know to target them first. After all, no lowly leader of a Sith Empire is going to be caught dead on a frigate. Destroy the leadership, destroy the opposition's organization."

"How does that help me?"

"You, you have the opportunity to move in the background. To win over your fellow ground-troopers and gain a following. Believe me, nothing earns respect faster than fighting in a life-or-death battle at someone's side. Hardly anyone these days pays attention to the ground forces. Even in the rest of the galaxy, the glory of fighting in ship-to-ship combat is what's broadcasted in the movies and in the propaganda. You're a Saber, you'll have command of a bunch of Tyros, right?"

"Depends on what Master Annax feels like."

"Insist upon it," Doran advised. "They don't even have to be the best or brightest. The most important thing is that you keep as many of them alive as possible. Earn their trust and loyalty. When the more competent Tyros see that you care for those under you, they'll be more willing to work with you. Your fellow Sabers might be mad as Kessel for your popularity, show them your secret."

"What? Why would I do that?"

"Everyone who mimics you will be seen as a poor copy," Doran answered. "The difference between you and most of the other Tribe I've seen so far is that you truly care and believe in your vision of an empire ruled by the Tribe. Hard to have an empire if you get the foundation and its future killed off. Your successes will draw the attention of the other Masters. They might send you on suicide missions to try and nip your influence before it spreads. Like I said earlier, your main goal will be to live no matter what indignity you might face. Those who go with you will be expected to die as well, convince them that the Tribe will be poorer for their deaths. This time, when you return, you'll have earned the respect of not only those who were on the fence about you, but your enemies in the Circle as well. They'll truly see that the Force is with you and when they start taking you seriously, so will your allies in the Circle."

"I half expected you to convince me to defect to the Jedi once we return to the galaxy," Vestara chuckled, shaking her head. "You continue to surprise me, master Jedi."

"The Tribe is your family, I get it," Doran shook his head with a small smirk. "I know all about different types of family, how you stick by them even if they're dundering bucket-heads with a penchant for suicidal impulses."

"The Mandalorians," Vestara nodded, remembering some of the many stories he had regaled her with over his time in servitude.

"Yup. You choose who you want as a family, as friends. Me telling you to go to the Jedi would be like me telling you who your family should be. As flawed as the Tribe can be, it's still your family."

Vestara smiled softly, rubbing at her eyes and surprised at how open she was being. She
briefly checked her mental defenses in case the Jedi had done anything, but it was more out of reflex than actual suspicion. The check also revealed something else.

"While we're on the topic of truth-telling, what did you do to my connection to Ship?"

"You want it back?" Doran raised an eyebrow.

"Yes…no…maybe," Vestara again looked away. In the almost two years since forming that bond, she had come to rely on Ship's advice, Ship's whispers in the back of her head reassuring her that the dream was still alive. Though Ship had an annoying habit of sometimes hijacking her words or actions if she began to behave contrary to what the vessel wanted, it was still an odd source of comfort to her.

"I'm projecting a passive field of Force energy attuned to the EM and Force spectrum used by Force-sensitive machines," Doran explained. "If you weave it into your Force-presence, you can subconsciously generate the field and not worry about it disappearing when you sleep."

"This is tech-Force stuff, right? Like how you showed me how to manipulate the servant droids and security equipment?"

"Same basic concept, bigger picture."

"Teach me," Vestara demanded.

"Think bubble of Force energy using the tech-Force. Rather than directing the energy into the droid or machine you want to affect, make it surround you. It'll take a bit of trial and error as you have to attune yourself to the exact frequency Ship is using and then run a counter-frequency to cancel her messages out. Kind of like a self-contained Faraday cage. I can point out a couple of books in this library that will help you narrow down the energies Ship is using. Take it with you on those boring hyperspace journeys."
Vestara consented with a nod. One of the reasons why she had kept him alive, aside from the stories he told that helped her mind fill in the picture of how the galaxy had changed during her Tribe's absence, was that he also instructed her in the ways of the Force. He never asked for anything in turn, seemed to enjoy helping her achieve new skills. Some techniques she picked up quickly, others seemed impossibly difficult. And she kept every ability he taught her a secret. As far as the rest of the Tribe knew, he was an example of Jedi weakness, half-mad with delusion of peace and serenity. If they knew what she had learned, she knew that the Circle would take the Jedi for their own gain and again leave her with nothing.

"I will practice when I have the time. As useful as Ship is, it sometimes goes beyond what I require of it. Learning to block out its affects will definitely be beneficial."

"Just a warning," Doran tapped the book he had been reading. "From all accounts your people have recorded. If you block out the Meditation Sphere too often or too long, the bond will break and it will seek someone else. If it can't mould you into the tool that will help it accomplish its programming, you're no longer any use to it."

"Thank you for the warning," Vestara tilted her head. She wondered briefly if the loss of the Meditation Sphere would actually hurt at all. Ship had been vital to her confidence and success early on, but its ability to forcefully guide her actions if she began to deviate from what it had planned was more than a little far as she was concerned, the Tribe's leadership blamed her for being chosen by the Sphere and only

tolerated her presence in the Circle chamber because of her connection to the antique vessel.
The atmosphere changed as she sensed her father draw near. Immediately her emotional barriers and icy cold demeanor returned. She took a step away from the Jedi, wiping away any sign that she had been crying with her sleeve.

"Vestara?" She heard her father's voice from the foyer.

"In here," Vestara said emotionlessly, her light brown eyes cooling completely.
Doran smiled sympathetically and once more took his seat, picking up the book he had been reading earlier. He gestured with his other hand at the collar remote she had thrown. She briefly held out a hand and summoned it, giving him no acknowledgment for his assistance.

Seconds later, Circle of Lords member Gavar Khai entered the room. He was not a big man, nor was he unremarkable. Radiating strength like most members of the Tribe

"My slave was reading to me about the nature of Ship," Vestara gestured to Doran. "I was curious as to what it would do since the Circle saw fit to deny me access to it."

"Daughter."

"Father." Vestara revealed nothing. She had assumed that her father had his reasons for acting against her in the Circle of Lords, and she was fine with that. If she was incapable of seeing his betrayal of her for personal gain, then she deserved what had come. But she no longer felt love towards the man who had sired her.

"What I did was to protect you," Gavar exhaled, no doubt sensing her hostility.

"By having me remain behind? By setting the other factions against me?" Vestara hissed. "Or was it when you voiced a lack of confidence in my abilities only a few weeks after I had returned with the Star Destroyer and other vessels for the Tribe? Had Sith Masters supervise my other missions and take credit for the successes of myself and Ship. When father? When were you protecting me? Why do you think I needed protection in the first place?"

"Foolish child! Grand Lord Vol was plotting your assassination!" Gavar snarled back. "With you dead, he would then force the Meditation Sphere to acknowledge him and his power. If you continued to stand out, continued to make him look foolish with your successes, continued to be a threat to his power, you would have been killed!"

"What?" Vestara blinked wildly.

"Idiot," Gavar snapped. "Even your slave saw the threat the first week he was on this planet. Convinced your mother of the danger, and she in turn told me."

Vestara spun back around to Doran, who was studiously reading the book in his hands. "You?"

"He was right. You have your mother to thank for saving your life. She was the one who came up with the plan to minimize your efforts and your profile on the Circle. That doing so would convince the Grand Lord you weren't worth the effort and that he could establish the Tribe as the pre-eminent power in the galaxy without the Meditation Sphere."

"But…You ascended to the Circle of Lords when…"

"Think, daughter! I raised no fool. Yes, I acquired my position at your expense, but it is because I now sit in the Circle of Lords that I could redirect its attention away from you. And then you had to clumsily form your own alliances, have Master Rhea and High Lord Yur back your efforts to regain prominence in the Tribe. You could have been safe on this planet, protected by the Meditation Sphere and away from the fighting and attention of Grand Lord Vol!"

"I don't want to be safely locked away! I want to serve the Tribe, shed my blood for it if need be just like all of my brothers and sisters on this planet!" Vestara yelled.

"If you had stayed, you would have also preserved the life of your 'slave'," Gavar replied shaking his head. "The order for his execution was agreed upon by the Circle just after you left. Apparently you gave the apprentice of Lord Xal some affront and he dropped all opposition to the plan."

Vestara heard Doran hum what suspiciously sounded like 'I told you so' under his breath as he perused his book.

"You're so smart, master Jedi. What's your plan to get out of this one?" Vestara snarked, ignoring her father's presence.

"Always two there are. Well, in the Jedi case, a lot more, but in general practice there's two," Doran muttered, as if reciting some school book. "A master and an apprentice."

"Your apprentice…" Vestara paused, vaguely recalling the shorter female Jedi he had tricked into leaving the ship. Or had he? She opened her mouth to ask him just that, but he motioned towards her father with his eyes. With an annoyed huff, she gripped the remote and shocked him once more. "Foolish idiot, I might as well let them kill you."

"You cannot hide your fondness of him from me, daughter."

"I assume the execution will take place soon?" Vestara turned back to her father, her face impassive.
"By week's end. It's going to be public. The Grand Lord wishes to show the others he still has power over you after what occurred in the meeting."

"Remind me to kill Ahri later," Vestara said under her breath. "Public, meaning the amphitheater?"

"As part of the feasts and celebrations to mark our official return to the galaxy," Gavar nodded.
"Hear that, slave?" Vestara pressed the shock-collar button once more, noting that the Jedi was writhing in pain a lot more than when she usually shocked him. She ended the treatment and flipped him onto his back with the toe of her boot. "I did not hear any response. You are going to be executed tomorrow evening surrounded by legions of the Tribe, far from your family and friends. What have you to say about that?"

"There is no death, only the Force," Doran replied, giving her a brief wink unseen by her father.

Vestara felt a weight lift off her chest that she hadn't realized had been present. "I don't suppose the Grand Lord will send someone to pick him up now? I am tired of his senile babbling."

"That would be akin to him doing you a favor," Gavar raised a skeptically eyebrow. "I do not believe he will accept your sudden change of heart. You fought quite hard to keep him in your possession when the spoils of war were being divided, and there is a rumor you use him for more…carnal means."

She heard the Jedi repress a snigger and she used kicking him once more as an excuse to hide her sudden rush of embarrassment. "Father, I can promise you that no Jedi will ever touch me. Why would I ever bed one weaker and inferior to myself?"

"I said there are rumors. I did not say I believed them," Gavar said with some amusement. "It is a father's prerogative to embarrass his daughter after all."

"I only kept him around because he was knowledgeable about the galaxy we are returning to."

"The Circle has appreciated your reports and have taken detailed notes. It was part of the reason they were willing to let you keep him. As he has developed a trust in you, they thought you'd learn more than their methods."

"I know, they use me for their goals and give none of the accolades I am due," Vestara returned sarcastically.

Gavar shook his head. "If you are truly apathetic to his living or dying, then I would kill him yourself and deny the Grand Lord satisfaction."

"Or let him kill the slave and see how completely unaffected I am. I might even thank him afterwards."

"Or that," Gavar sighed. "Step carefully, daughter. Off of Kesh, my ability to shield you from the Circle's plots is greatly diminished, and without the Meditation Sphere, you are without your greatest support."

Vestara straightened, shaking her head and smirking once more. "Father, I am Saber Vestara Khai of the Tribe. Regardless of the challenges before me, I will overcome them all, the Force will free me."

DL-III-DL

Vestara fondly ran a hand through the red and black ruff of her pet Uvak, allowing the semi-sentient dragon-like being to eat from her hand. "The time is nearing, Tikk. I leave very soon. I am not permitted to bring you with me."

The reptavian, slightly bigger than her own form, nuzzled her in turn, emitting a small rawring noise.

"None but the beast-riders among the Keshiri guard are allowed to bring their Uvak," Vestara replied, shaking her head. She could feel the beast's feelings just as much as it could feel her own. Having imprinted herself on Tikk before it had even hatched from his egg, the Uvar was fanatically loyal to her and one of the few living beings she could say for certain wouldn't betray her.

Tikk whimpered and nudged her with its head once more.

"Stop that," Vestara scolded. "You are my Uvak, show some dignity. If this is to be our final farewell, then so be it."

It growled and bumped her hand so that the rest of the food she was holding fell to the ground.

Vestara arched an eyebrow. "Not all of my family is going. My mother will be assisting the Circle Lord unfortunate enough to stay behind in keeping this planet secure. You *will* behave for her, or she has my permission to put you down. If you cannot benefit the Tribe, you are no longer needed. That has always been the way of our people and it won't change if I go away."

Tikk growled and promptly turned away from Vestara, stalking back towards its stables.

"Be that way!" Vestara called out, throwing the saddle and riding equipment that had been slung over her shoulders to the ground. She held out a hand, and the Uvak stopped in its tracks. It shuddered as

her will was imposed over her own, and then turned around and walked back to her. "I offered you a chance to live in luxury while I was away, but you apparently don't appreciate the things I do for you either."
There was a surge of Force energy, and the Uvak staggered backwards, its hind legs failing it and causing it to fall back on its haunches. It looked at Vestara in complete bewilderment, confused as to what had just happened.

"Go," Vestara barked, gesturing with her hand. "I have severed our bond. You are free. Go!"

The Uvak blinked its green eyes at Vestara, shaking its head as if to clear it.

"Go!" Vestara snarled, adding the Force to her command. She pulled her parang clear, the glass blade reflecting the twin moons above.

Even with the command, the Uvak seemed completely lost. For its entire six years it had grown up with its bond to Vestara as its guiding focus. It had eaten, slept, and spent every waking hour a slave to her will. Now without that focus, it had no idea what to do with the freedom given to it.

"Go," Vestara repeated softly, a single tear escaping. "Go or I will have to put you down myself. This planet does not accept weakness. If you are so incapable of living without my will…"

Tikk made a growling squawk noise of incomprehension, making no move to take wing.
Stepping forward, Vestara cupped the creature's head, gazing into its intelligent green eyes. "Go, live your own life now. I will most likely never return to Kesh. You are no longer needed."

The glass parang shone in the night as she placed it against the creature's neck.
"Last chance Tikk," Vestara whispered hoarsely. "Show me the same honor I have shown you and fly off now. Do not force my hand."

But still the beast stayed, its own gaze trying to discern Vestara's thoughts without the link to guide it.

Vestara closed her eyes, her one hand moving in a quick, swift, stroke. She felt hot blood pour her hands, could feel the spark of life vacate the creature she had cared for and nurtured since she had first been selected as Tyro. She felt the large beast shudder as it breathed its last, its body twitching once before falling limp. She released her grip on it, heard it thump lifelessly to the ground.

She stepped away, gazing impassively at the corpse.

"Very good, daughter," Gavar Khai said approvingly, stepping forward. "You know as well as I that the creature would have gone mad without your presence. Best dispatch it now, spare it from future suffering."

"Of course," Vestara replied simply, cleaning the blade off with a piece of cloth. "You should probably summon mother. She will be able to make a hefty profit from the beast's skin and meat at the market."

"You should probably say farewell to that Jedi slave of yours," Gavar advised. "After all, by this time tomorrow he will have been publicly executed."

"He is of no consequence," Vestara's tone remained emotionless, her mental barriers allowing no iota of feeling through. She began to head back towards the estate. "If he is to die tonight or tomorrow it does not matter to me. I'll soon be on a ship heading away from this planet and he, like the Uvak, are reminders that the strong survive and the weak perish. It was the way of our people long before we came to this planet, and it will be the backbone from which the Sith Empire will be built upon."

"If you are certain, daughter," Gavar shrugged apathetically. "He did wish me to convey his good fortune to you for your endeavors in creating that Sith Empire."

"He is a slave," Vestara repeated dismissively. In her heart, however, she couldn't help but feel a gnawing guilt. Slave or not, the Jedi had helped her so much. A Khai did not like being indebted to anyone, even a slave. But there was nothing she could do lest she throw away her own future, the future she had in mind for her people, for a single being. "If I thought it wouldn't invite more trouble, I'd have gotten rid of him when you informed me of the Grand Lord's plans."

"Very well, then go get washed up. Lord Yuvar Xal and his apprentice have invited us to a strategy meeting concerning our first targets. Though arriving blood-soaked and murderous might prove memorable, I do not think that is the impression we need to make tonight."

Vestara glanced down at her hands and robes, both slick with Uvak blood. "A bloodless change would be good."

Gavar chuckled. "I do not think that is the change the Circle of Lords have in mind when we return to the galaxy."

"For the Tribe, father."

"For the Tribe."

DL-IV-DL

A part of Vestara was infuriated that she was worried so much over the fate of her slave. It was not fitting for a Sith of the Tribe, nor was being annoyed over the fact that Ahri might have been right in saying the Jedi had made her soft. It was all she could do not to pace endlessly in her room. It wouldn't have been becoming of her to do so. Instead, she had to carry on as if the Jedi's life meant nothing to her. The Grand Lord's security forces had taken him at first light on the day of the ceremonies, and had been more than a little put out by how eager she had seemed to get rid of the slave.
Serves the blasted Jedi right. It was entirely his fault he was in his current situation after all.

At that thought, Vestara nodded to herself. Right, if the fool hadn't surrendered to the Tribe's forces, he would have gotten away without incident. In fact, all he had to do was step through the airlock and he would have been home free. Instead, he did the Jedi thing and decided to live his next year and a half as her slave.

All his fault.

She placed her new war-mask over her face, a mask that left the upper half of her face exposed, and methodically slid on her leather gloves. Much had changed from the armor once worn by the faithful of Naga Sadow. With materials like durasteels and rarer metals no longer available, armor for subsequent generations of Tribe slowly changed as

local customs and styles were adapted. Much of the improvements and crafting came from the militarized continent of Alanciari. The master armor-smiths and metal-workers from the larger continent had perfected armor making during the millennia of cold war before the Tribe absorbed them, and now worked hand-in-hand with Tribe armor-smiths to create Force-infused robes and plating for the soldiers of the Tribe.

With Ship and subsequent raids, durasteel and other technologies had once again become available, and the armor had changed once more. On her initial mission out with Ship, she had worn the standard Tribe battle-attire—black robes covering red armor-plating, with a full facemask and Keshiri steelsilk-spun pants. With the influx of technology, it was decided that the Tribe's fighters would now have only the best.

Pulling up her silver-lined hood, Vestara studied her reflection. A chrome-gilded durasteel mantel sat on her shoulders, complete with neck-guard. Attached by a single chain to the mantel was a flowing black, blaster-proof cape. Rather than robes, she now sported a gleaming black three-piece armor set that had been fitted custom-made for her and adhered to her body in such a way to maximize her movement without sacrificing protection. The upper breast-plate was made of blaster-proof material, rated to withstand shots from the modern-day blasters. The lighter armor plate beneath was made up of flexsteel and cortosis and was designed to ablate lightsaber strikes. Her lower torso was protected by a heavier version of the flexsteel and cortosis weave beneath slender durasteel plating. The half-mask she wore doubled as a filtration and rebreather system should smoke or poisonous gas be utilized. In all, she was the picture of lethal beauty.

She stared down her reflection with baleful yellow eyes. The design was said to be influenced by the armors of Sith Lords of old, meant to symbolize the Tribe's connection to the past and announce their legitimacy as heirs to that legacy. Though others would be dressed in similar attire, it was her family's connections that enabled her to wear armor made from off-world materials. The last to slide into place was her glass parang in one side of her heavy utility belt and her lightsaber on her other.

"Daughter, we must be leaving now!" Gavar called up the stairs.

Vestara gave her reflection one last stare-down, nodded, and pulled her hood over her light brown hair. She emerged from her room and made her way to the grand staircase. Awaiting her at the bottom were her parents. Her father, Circle Lord Gavar Khai wore a garb similar to her own, but with gold trim instead of silver. His half-mask was also a deep red in the style of the Keshiri military. Her mother, Lahka Khai, was not Force-sensitive and was thus not permitted to wear such clothing. But she was a member of the Tribe and served as a captain in the secret police force used to root out threats to the Circle. Her armor, hailing from designs used by Naga Sadow for *his* infantry, closely resembled the rank-and-file of the tribe's forces, the main difference being its color. Where the rank-and-file troopers wore gleaming full-body suits of silver, copper, or red depending on their station, her armor was matte black.

Vestara had read in the histories Ship provided that a Sith Lord by the name of Revan had later co-opted the design for his own forces with a few modifications of his own. Rather than a narrow black visor used on the helmets of the infantry of the Tribe, he had changed it to a full face mask. The helmets of the Tribe also contained two 'eyes' of Naga Sadow directly above the visor slat in gleaming metal. But for all intents and purposes, the armor design of the two eras had scarcely changed.

"Saber Khai," Gavar acknowledged with a note of pride in his voice.

"Lord Khai," Vestara tilted her own head back.

"Shall we go?" Gavar said rhetorically.

The trio exited their home and headed towards their awaiting speeder. Only to pause when they saw several security vehicles racing down the road towards their estate.

"Lahka?" Gavar voiced with a touch of impatience.

"I'm sorry, my Lord. I do not know what this is about."

The lead speeder swung around to block the Khai family vehicle, and a squad of black-armored troopers emerged. A second speeder, stopping behind the Khai family vehicle, unloaded another squad of black-

armored soldiers. A third stopped behind the second, and a quartet of red-armored soldiers emerged, followed by several Sith Sabers.

"What is the meaning of this?" Gavar barked.

"Lord Khai, pardon the interruption, but we must make sure your grounds are secure before you leave," one of the Sabers said apologetically. He briefly looked to the soldiers. "Search the speeder, the house. Leave no room unchecked."

"I demand an explanation, or I will have your head!"

"Sir, we are under orders from the Grand Lord himself. A dangerous fugitive has escaped and he was worried for the safety of your family. It would be an embarrassment to him should a Circle Lord be assassinated on the eve of our ascendancy."

"Fugi…" Gavar began

"You've lost the Jedi," Lahka noted, unintentionally interrupting her husband.
It was only because of her link to her mother that Vestara was able to pick up extreme amusement from the otherwise stony captain of Internal Security. Gavar must have likewise felt it, because he raised an eyebrow at the younger Force-user.

"Is this true?"

"I only know what the Grand Lord has ordered me to do," the Saber said, shaking his head almost pleadingly.

"How did…" Vestara trailed off as she noted two of the red-armored guards still guarding the speeders. One was a mammoth of a man, and the other a more slender woman barely taller than Vestara. For once Vestara was glad for her jaw-covering mask, as she was sure her jaw would have dropped open then and there.
"Daughter?" Gavar turned to her, then glanced at the two guards. "Is there something wrong?"

"No…father…" Vestara managed through very dry lips. Just how crazy were these Jedi? As that thought crossed her mind, she'd swear that

she could feel the Jedi give her a mental wink in turn. "Nothing wrong at all."

"Why would the Jedi return here, it would be the first place we'd look," Gavar scowled back at the unfortunate Sith Saber following orders.

"Again, I only know what I was told," the Saber said helplessly.

"You have checked our speeder," Lahka gestured. "May we have your permission to head to the ceremonies?"

"Of course," the Saber said, looking relieved at the out she had given him.

Vestara saw the larger of the two guards she had signaled out make a subtle gesture with his hand.

The Saber in turn spun to him and the smaller female guard. "You two, go with them and ensure their safety."

"Yes, Saber Dov," they saluted smartly, hands over their hearts.

"Is that hardly necessa…"

"Lord Khai," Vestara said carefully. "If the Grand Lord has people with us from here to the ceremonies, no one can accuse us of conspiring to recover the exceedingly stupid Jedi I had as my manservant."

"You are wise beyond your years, Saber Khai," the larger guard voiced.

Vestara wished she had the shock-collar control at that moment. "I did not ask for your opinion, worm. You are to accompany my family, but it does not mean I'll tolerate you."

"Saber Dov," the male voiced. "Since Saber Khai is rumored to have romantic relations with her slave, shall we have her ride in our speeder instead? We don't want to endanger a Circle Lord should the dastardly Jedi make an attempt to reunite himself with his paramour."

Vestara's eyes narrowed as the other Saber nodded as if it were the best idea in the world. "An excellent suggestion trooper…what was your name again?"

"Esti, sir. Narod Esti."

"I shall put in a commendation for your insightfulness. Saber Khai, if it will not be too much of an inconvenience, will you ride in their speeder as they follow your parents?"

Vestara gritted her teeth behind her mask, glaring daggers through the narrow slit of a visor in Doran's helmet. "No inconvenience at all. It's for the Tribe after all."

"Saber Khai," the female trooper gestured towards the speeder they had come in. "If you will."

"I'll see you at the ceremony, Lord Khai, mother," Vestara acknowledged, moving to the speeder door. "I am sure the Tribe's best and brightest will be able to keep me safe from an idiot-brained Jedi. After all, if he freed himself, he couldn't possibly be as stupid as to return here or try to intercept us en-route to the largest gathering of the Tribe on record."

"Told you," Vestara heard the female trooper mutter to her counterpart, her helmet speaker disabled so that the sound didn't travel far.

"Keep my daughter safe, Trooper Esti. Do not let that Jedi come within a single meter of my daughter," Gavar Khai growled. "Or you will suffer a fate far worse than death."

"Yes, Lord Khai," Doran saluted smartly, then slid into the enclosed speeder.

Once all doors within the speeder were closed and they were making their way down the driveway, Vestara could no longer maintain her composure.

"Are you brain dead!? What sort of idiot impulse possessed you to come back if you were free?"

"Wow, that sounded really familiar," Doran said deadpan. "I think I've heard those very words before."

The red-armored trooper in the co-pilot's seat thunked him not-so-gently on his shoulder. Before shaking her hand out. "Ouch, stupid Durasteel-for-Muscle. You know, if it weren't for us being in a position to bail you out, your harebrained schemes would have gotten you killed several times over."

"I definitely factor you into my plans," Doran said in defense.

Vestara glanced to the other woman. "You are his apprentice?"

"Kyrelle Frieneil, at your service," the other woman shifted in her seat to look back at Vestara with her helmeted head. "Been with this *Di'kutla* of a Jedi for about twelve years now."

"Lovers?" Vestara asked, sensing the very strong bond between the two.

"What? No! Ewww!" Kyrelle recoiled.

"Thanks," Doran replied dryly.

"No offense to you, master, but you're like my big brother. Being with you that way…a whole bunch of wrong. I' m sure you understand Saber Khai."

"Some of the families on Kesh practice inbreeding, they only had so many people onboard the *Omen* when it crashed after all. I don't think that's a turn off for them," Doran supplied.

Kyrelle whacked him again on the shoulder with her other hand, and again shook it off.

"Okay, those added armor platings so don't make it fair."

"You just hate it when I'm right."

Vestara stared blankly at the two of them, unsure if she was dreaming, hallucinating, or was having a bad case of nerves as she prepared to leave Kesh for what was probably going to be the last time in a very long while. "You followed him to Kesh?"

"Took a shuttle from the Mando ship and mag-clamped it to the back of the bridge-tower before you guys jumped to hyperspace," Kyrelle confirmed. "Wasn't about to let my dunderheaded master get in over his head without me. Promised Sannah I would never leave his side unless he found someone to replace me. Once on Kesh, I just blended in, acted arrogantly superior and visited the sights. I could see why my master was head-over-heels for visiting a place like this. It's like you guys were stuck in a time capsule. Things he and I saw only in ancient holocrons and wall-etchings are like present day for you people. Straight down to these armor sets. I mean, if we can get back to the galaxy before you Sithies make it go nova, we can sell these sets as 'antiques' and make a fortune."

"You…did not wish to warn the rest of the galaxy about the Tribe?"

"It can take care of itself," Kyrelle waved a hand. "It has the likes of the Solos and Skywalkers defending it from itself."

"Skywalker," Vestara repeated, a memory returning to her.

"She has a crush on Ben," Doran supplied.

This time Vestara used the hilt of her parang and bonked him on the back of his head.

"Hey! Driving here!" Doran protested, rubbing his head.

"He has a girlfriend, you know," Kyrelle added.

"The blond, I saw," Vestara shrugged. "And I do *not* have a crush on him."

"Uh huh," Kyrelle whirled back around in her seat and began humming something that probably had more of a meaning wherever in the galaxy she was from. Whatever it was definitely sounded teasing though.

"Spirit Girl, can it. Sithy passenger gets extra-Sithy when provoked."

"Don't poke the wild Sith, got it."

Vestara tried to calm herself, knowing she would be in all sorts of trouble should it ever be discovered that the people driving her were two Jedi. In fact, all her instincts, training, and common-sense told her that she should dispatch the both of them now. Use their deaths as a way to one-up the Grand Lord. A sort of h*ey, I killed two Jedi, how many have **you** killed*? She chuckled to herself. Like *that* would go over well.

"What do you two have planned?"

"Don't worry about that either," Doran shook his head. "Just wanted to let you know that I was okay, and good luck with the whole war and galactic-domination thing. I'll be rooting for you."

"You want the Tribe to succeed?" Vestara said incredulously.

"*Rooting for you*," Doran clarified, using Keshiri Basic to ensure there was no misunderstanding. "*You're a good person, Vestara. Probably the first Sith I've met to be able to use the dark side for good. Most of the Sith and dark Jedi I've met are like Vran or the Grand Lord, unable to find a Hutt's backside even if they were shoved up into it.*"

"That is gross," Kyrelle groaned.

"*Stick to your dreams, Vestara,"* Doran continued with a gentle seriousness. "*If the Sith Empire of your imagination ever comes to be, the galaxy will be much more stable for it. Especially if it can live in peace beside the Jedi Order.*"

"The Jedi would never let us be," Vestara shook her head. "In every moment of history, they have made it their mission to kill the Sith. There will never be peace between Sith and Jedi."

"You haven't killed me, I'm a Jedi," Doran pointed out. "Start small, never think anything is impossible until you've actually tried it a ton of times with an army of friends and likeminded people."

"That's your advice?" Vestara laughed softly.

"Hey, we Jedi Masters aren't all wise and all knowing."

"We're here," Kyrelle warned.

Doran removed his helmet and looked back to her with a wink and boyish grin. "Saber Khai, we've reached your destination. Go out there, wow them all, and then go and change the galaxy."

DL-V-DL

The amphitheater was in a valley in the Takara Mountains, the looming structure of the Sith Temple at the mountains' summit visible in the light of the setting sun and the many torchlights that surrounded it. The amphitheater was of new construction, having been made upon the success of Vestara's first mission, when it became clear that the Tribe would finally be leaving Kesh. It was a vast structure, capable of seating millions. Indeed it looked as if all of Kestah had come to the ceremonies. The stands were packed with spectators and onlookers, the distinct purple skin of the Keshiri people and their blue-hued garments standing out amidst the dark-gray rock of the amphitheater.

Vast stone braziers lined the top of the amphitheater, with more modern lightposts ringing the bottom. The atmosphere was full of excitement and trepidation as the young, old, and non-combatants of the Tribe and Kesh awaited to see their family members and loved ones off on the monumental undertaking.

And then the ceremonies began. Deep, powerful drums pounded twice in quick succession, the vibrations loud and echoing off the surrounding mountains. The crowd quickly fell silent. The drums beat once more, two bold strokes that made those present feel the sound in their very bodies.

A lone horn, long and mournful blared out. And then the drumming began in earnest. Slow at first, but gradually picking up speed. The horn sounded again, and a more wooden thumping joined in the beating thunder of the drums.

Murmurs filled the crowd as a line of hooded figures began to emerge out of the mountain facing the amphitheater. With them almost on the horizon, the vid-screens projected them in more detail, the robes showing them to be members of the priestly caste of the Tribe. Their role as keepers of lore, users of Sith Alchemy, and guardians of the Sith Temple was well known to the audience. But they had never been

seen out of the Sith Temple itself. Their presence at the foot of the mountain surprised many. They began to chant to the timing of the pounding drums and wooden poles, their words said in the Tribe's Old Tongue—the ancient Sith language.

Wai Nwûl!
Shâsot!
Tyûk! Midwan! Asha!
Won
Qyâsik
Nun!

It was the ancient code the Tribe had lived by, had ordered their society after and had sustained them for five thousand years.

The Code of the Sith.

The horn blared once more, the drummers continuing their rumbling beat. A Keshiri honor-guard on winged Uvak took flight from the mountain perches. With precision flying, they performed daring feats of acrobatics that had the crowds ooh and ahh. A troupe of dancers in fiery-red outfits, thousands strong, rose up center-stage and performed a choreographed routine that had been practiced to perfection. They swirled and whirled, their flowing sleeves flapping about and turning them into miniature cyclones of flame with every movement.

Sith'ari
Wai Qorit
Kûshoksh Ashaanjat
Dâjit
Midwanosh
Sith'ari
The Gods
Eternal
Shall dream of victory
Witness
The power
Of the Gods

Another set of thunderous drums picked up the beat to join in the first, the ground shaking from the vibration. The dancers twirled off to the sides of the stage as it sunk into the ground. When it ascended once

more, the bright lights and flickering flame glinted off the polished silver armor of a full battalion of Sith ground troopers. The crowd went wild upon seeing them, cheers and whistles filling the air. The ground behind the platform shook, parting much to the amazement of the crowd, and a lift thrice as large rose up to bring even more silver-armored troopers to bear. In unison, the troops snapped to attention and took several large steps towards the mountain range. The lifts retracted, and then rose once more. These groups took furthers steps outwards as the ground shifted to reveal dozens more lifts of similar size. All rose, bringing the soldiers of the Tribe into the light of the evening sun. All throughout, the drums pounded, the dancers danced on the sidelines, streamers fluttered, and the Uvak riders swooped through the air.

The process repeated, until the field between the mountains and the amphitheater was filled with silver-armored soldiers in gleaming armor. A vast array tens of millions strong that presented the bulk of the military might of the Tribe. Then the lifts rose once more, revealing simultaneously tens of thousands of copper-armored soldiers, the specialists and technicians of the Tribe. The next to appear were the red-armored troopers, the elites and special operators. Emerging last were the generals and higher ranking officers in opulent gold armor, each wielding long-arms strapped to their backs. By then the crowd was going absolutely crazy, cheering at the tops of their lungs.

A roar filled the air, the almost alien sound of starship engines responding to the pounding drums, and everyone fell silent. Dozens of frigates and transports that lowered themselves into the atmosphere like streaking meteors. There were vessels captured from the Aduba Starhoppers, from the Corporate Sector, from the Hutts, from the Tion Hegemony, and even local ships constructed using the aesthetics of the ships that had once served Naga Sadow. The lone horn sounded, and the drums picked up once more. The frigates landed in the field between the mountains and the amphitheater, and the troops marched on to their assignments with unquestioning discipline. The frigates performed an intricate ballet as they leapfrogged each other upon filling up their assigned contingent.

The chanting priests repeated the Sith Code, and the cheering promptly resumed as the black-robed Force-users of the Tribe appeared on the main stage. As with the ground-forces, the Tyros emerged first. All armored, with lightsaber and parang at their sides,

they marched without pause from the lifts towards their awaiting frigates. The Sabers were next to emerge, the perimeter armed with the ancient Sith lanvarok or lightspear in addition to their usual lightsabers. Some headed off to follow the Tyros, while others stepped to the side.

A drum-roll picked up as the lift lowered for one final time. When it emerged, the horn bellowed one last time as the Circle of Lords appeared in concentric circles, with Grand Lord Darish Vol standing in the center in glittering robes of gold. The drumming stopped, the last echoes of the horn's call echoing off the mountains. The crowd shifted in nervous anticipation. What was the leader of the Tribe about to do? What was the Skygod leader about to do to demonstrate his power?

They received their silent questions a moment later.
With a dramatic thrust of his hand, Darish Vul aimed it at the Sith Temple standing tall at the highest mountain point. The Force blazed around him, throwing up a storm of dust and gravel. And then a tremendous cracking sound resounded from the tops of the mountains.

The crowd gasped in unison. The temple began to crumble as if giant hands were crushing it inwards. Large boulders bounded down the side of the mountain as part of a series of cascading landslides. An audible snap rang out, and the temple collapsed completely. As it did, what looked like the entire mountain side began to give way. The noise was terrible and frightening, and yet the sight was completely awe-inspiring.
From the massive plume of dust, the prow of the Sith dreadnaught *Omen* rose into the air for the first time in five millennia. It's metal plating catching the last rays of the sun, where it glinted menacingly. The fleet of frigates all swarmed around the rising behemoth in parade formation, the captured cruisers *Dark Blade* and *Eternal Crusader* likewise coming down from low orbit to make their presence felt. Innumerable squadrons of blade-shaped starfighters, their design the same as the fighters of five millennia ago, soared through the air. Their engines bright and blue against the darkening sky as they took up their positions around the fleet. And as the last of the dust cloud settled, everyone stared up in amazed disbelief as the might of the Tribe hovered before them.

And then the platform with the Circle of Lords vibrated and began to rise even further, repulsor technology acquired from the off-world

enabling a feat none on Keshiri had seen before. The crowd was in complete silence, thoughts of the members of the Tribe truly being gods going through their minds. The platform continued upwards, carrying its load towards the *Omen* in the far distance.

The chanting picked up once more, the drums and percussion sticks adding their primal beats. The message they were broadcasting was clear

We are Sith'ari
And we have returned to the stars at last!

DL-Chapter End-DL